



Event Report by Jen Tsen Kwok for the Asian Australian Studies
Research Network (AASRN: asianaustrianstudies.org)

Chinese in Australian Politics Colloquium

UTS, Sydney; 9 September 2010

I attended the Chinese in Australian Politics colloquium on 9 September 2010 which was organised under the auspices of the UTS China Research Centre and Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Centre. Following the colloquium, a dinner was held at Emperor's Garden Restaurant in Haymarket where a Q&A styled seminar involving a number of prominent councillors.

The colloquium, organised with the support of the Chinese Australian Forum (CAF), was chaired by Professor Andrew Jakubowicz and presented twelve papers over the course of the day, although there was also a response to each of the papers.

Though this was the more academic side of events, a number of emerging political identities attended and contributed to the symposium. This included Dai Le, the NSW Liberal Party's candidate for the Cabramatta by-election in 2008 and the Multicultural Relations Manager for the NSW Parliamentary Liberal Team, Marc Rerceretnam, Greens Councillor in Ashfield Council, as well as Jieh-Yung Lo, Councillor for the City of Monash.

The symposium dealt with quite a wide range of issues in relation to the political participation of Chinese Australians. For most, political participation was assumed to mean involvement in electoral politics. Numerous community leaders provided important contributions and anecdotes on their experience of Australian politics, in some instances as ethnic intermediaries for the major parties. Other community leaders focused upon the cultural attributes which dissuaded Chinese Australians from being involved in politics. This latter point was not universally accepted, however, with numerous Sydney-siders pointing out the durability of the Sydney community's political engagement through the formation of CAF after the Blainey affair.

A number of themes in relation to electoral politics, nonetheless, did emerge. There was some agreement of an under-representation of Chinese in Australian electoral politics. There was some agreement that the under-representation related to the depth of political engagement of local Chinese communities and, in particular, ambivalence to party membership. A number of community leaders provided strong counsel that there were structural barriers to greater electoral representation, and a number of leaders suggested that greater electoral representation required deeper

and longer engagement by young Chinese Australians in the major parties. Repeated later that night, numerous councillors such as Justin Li and Jieh-Yung Lo reinforced that their primary responsibility was to represent electorates and on behalf of political interests regardless of race. The place of community leadership was to enable appropriate support for greater legislative proportionality, not protection or defence of Chinese Australian interests.

The range of issues covered at the symposium was perhaps one of the most exciting things about the day. Papers by Wesa Chau (2010 Young Victorian of the Year), Chek Ling (*Plantings in a New Land*) and Professor Feng Chongyi considered different aspects of 'political socialisation,' or the texture of Australian political cultures as experienced by Chinese Australians in party politics, community politics and the diversity of political perspectives based upon migration experiences. The paper by Gao Jia took an innovative approach to political socialisation through an analysis of judicial resistance by Mainland Chinese in immigration litigation post White Australia.

Anthony Pun and Daphne Lowe-Kelly explored the Australian political climate and how to get more Chinese Australians into elected positions. Marc Rerceretnam & Merete Bjorkli provided preliminary findings of the experiences and racial barriers faced by Sydney councillors of Chinese descent. Jieh-Yung Lo addressed issues of electoral participation, advocating better community education around informal voting, and commented upon the need for culturally-diverse representatives in the political sphere.

The other academic papers covered a much wider field of political engagement and practice. Andrew Jakubowicz presented a paper set at the macro-political level, pointing to the emergent post-multicultural world in which China and Australia are deeply implicated in each other's economic interests. Jock Collins presented a sweeping case study into the politics of place in relation to Sydney's Chinatown, in particular, the admixture of economic, cultural and political factors. Christina Ho opened the nature of the political to important questions of transnational political practice through preliminary findings on the Chinese student support for the Olympics Torch Relay in 2008. Kazmi offered insights into the way Chinese state-owned corporations were observed and constructed in the cultural economies of Australian public life.

I presented a paper on Chinese Australian urban politics, using a case study of the competition for peak status between two Chinese organisations in Queensland. The argument I made was in this dispute it emerged that access to government and parliamentary representatives was proven to be a valuable social resource in itself because it provided legitimation. Implicit in this argument (and an argument I have made before) was that such networks are not urban regimes with a robust capacity

to influence political decision-making. If I had been afforded more time I would have also emphasised that an urban political approach would have drawn out the distinctness of political cultures based upon spatial integration.

The dinner that night was chaired by Professor Stephen Fitzgerald and MCed by CAF president Tony Pang. The political representatives included Justin Li, Marc Receretnam, Jieh-Yung Lo and Henson Liang. It also involved former MLA and Unity Party founder, Peter Wong, ex-ALP candidate and SBS journalist, Francis Lee, and Professor Wanning Sun from the UTS China Research Centre. The dinner brought together a number of prominent Chinese Australian community leaders, politicians, political candidates, and academics from around Sydney, as well as a host of interstate guests. It provided open and robust debate about the nature of Chinese Australian political participation and engagement, and an insight into possible collaborative futures. There was strong encouragement by participants for local Chinese language media to take a stronger editorial role.

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